

PRUSSIAN MILITARISM AT WORK

A LETTER

BY

THE RIGHT REV. DR. CLEARY,

ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOP OF AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND.

LONDON:
BARCLAY & FRY, LTD.

1917.

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THE LETTER OF A BISHOP-CHAPLAIN.

The following is a copy of a letter written to his clergy by the Right Rev. Dr. Cleary, R.C. Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand :—

DEAR REV. FATHERS,—

IN the course of a previous letter to you, I detailed a few of the results of my investigations into the conduct of the German army towards the civilian population in those parts of Northern France, in or near which I was acting as Catholic chaplain to a New Zealand Brigade that had been for some time without the ministrations of our Church. In this communication, I wish to restate in part, and in part to extend, the findings of inquiries over an area of some twenty miles long by five miles wide. These inquiries were based throughout on the testimony of eyewitnesses—clergy, mayors and other public functionaries, commercial men, some French officers and men, and hundreds of farmers, farm-workers, etc. A fast, light motor, kindly placed at my disposal while at the front, enabled me to visit a large number of towns, villages, farm houses, and workers' cottages, and to penetrate, on several occasions, a considerable distance into Belgium. While our Brigade was

billeted in towns, villages, and farms over a wide area, behind the lines, their long-drawn drills, fatigues, and other occupations limited my possibilities of attendance on them to a few short hours daily, and, when my hospital duties were done, I made the fullest use of my facilities for inquiring into the facts of the German occupation.

THE GERMAN WAR BOOK.

As editor of the "New Zealand Tablet," I had followed, at long range, the harsh system of proscription, expropriation, and language-suppression practised on unhappy Prussian Poland. And many times, both as youth and adult, I had personally witnessed some of the varied forms of hard oppression practised by the Prussian Administration in the conquered provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The misgovernment of these provinces differed, in one important respect, from any other of which I had knowledge from the reading of history, or of which I had had experience in a country known to you. The Prussian system had no "let up"—its iron pressure never eased; it presented no periods of relaxation as time went on. On the contrary, as the years sped by, the hard grind of oppression tended rather to increase, and to extend more and more to the intimate and personal things of life, as if the clear purpose was to break the heart and crush the spirit of the people. I had, however, only witnessed there the Prussian system of civil administration of a conquered territory. Till the last months of 1916 and

the early part of 1917 I had only seen the Prussian military system at work on military material, in the piping times of peace—sternly, and, not infrequently, violently, licking soldiers into shape on drill grounds, in camps, and on the march. I had, however, carefully read the several rather startling inculcations of “ruthlessness” and “terrorisation” of civilian populations so clearly enunciated in the “Kriegsbrauch im Landkriege,” the standard work issued by the German General Staff for the instruction and guidance of all army officers. I refer to it hereafter by its English designation, “The German War Book.” (Under this title it has been very carefully and conscientiously translated into English by Professor Morgan, M.A., of London University. In my quotations I use his translation).

With cynical frankness, this Prussian militarist publication provides for the violation of a number of acknowledged moral standards and sacred conventions (express or implied) which make for restraint, chivalry, and Christian feeling in the conduct of war. Indeed, the official “Introduction” to this official work declares that such Christian and humanitarian restrictions and conventions not infrequently “degenerate into sentimentality and flabby emotionalism,” and the system of organised “terrorismus” (terrorisation) of the civilian population of an invaded country is laid down as a policy of prime importance in the conduct of a war. Herein, this War Book is, on the whole, a faithful embodiment of the principles of Prussian militarism, as laid down by writers from

Clausewitz to Goltz and Bernhardt. Prussia and Prussian principles control and direct the whole German military machine. And Prussia holds the melancholy distinction of being the only Western nation of our time that has, both in print and in practice, declared that neither accepted moral standards nor established international conventions (such as the Hague Regulations) must be allowed to stand in the way of any desired military advantage. Side by side with the German War Book, I read and compared the "Manual of Military Law," which is the official text-book supplied to officers by the British War Office. It embodies the words or the effect of the Hague Regulations in the sections relating to the treatment of the civilians in time of war.

When making inquiries in France, I found (as I had expected) that some elements of the German army were not sufficiently Prussianised to live fully down to the ghastly ruthlessness sanctioned by the War Book. Of this, more will be said in due course.

FORMS OF OUTRAGE.

Both in Northern France and Belgium one hears very numerous stories of oppression and outrage against the civilian population. Some of these, told at second, third, or tenth hand, I felt bound to regard as exaggerated or wholly untrue. Others were stated in a form which did not aid investigation. Others, relating to fully detailed cases of alleged crimes (some of them of peculiar atrocity) I had not the time (nor,

as to certain of them, the inclination) to investigate. I here refer only to acts of oppression and violence, vouched for by eye-witnesses of the standing already described, or of declared competency and good character. The more public and striking outrages described hereunder are, moreover, supported by a very considerable mass of independent and convergent testimony which cannot be lightly set aside, and which induces a strong conviction that, on the whole, the German army of occupation did, in point of fact, translate into action the policy of "ruthlessness" and "terrorisation" against the non-combatant population of the part of France to which reference is here made.

Military regulations forbid the mention of places and persons in such communications as this; but as soon as this restriction is removed, the names (so far as I have noted them) will be forthcoming. Throughout my stay at the front, I found a particularly large mass of independent, widespread, and convergent testimony pointing to the practice of several chief forms of "frightfulness" directed or authorised by the German War Book. I limit myself here to the following:—

1. The official seizure of civilian hostages.
2. The officially organised and wholesale plunder of private property.
3. Murder, or massacre, of civilians, under the direction of army officers.

4. The organised and systematic destruction of churches, also under the direction of army officers.

5. I will conclude by reference to a few other authorised and serious violations of established conventions and usages of warfare among Christian and civilised peoples.

1. *HOSTAGES.*

During my stay in France, I met a number of prominent and respected civilians—mayors, parish priests, merchants, etc.—who had been seized by the German troops as hostages or sureties for the “good behaviour” of the local population towards the invaders. The “good behaviour” usually included the safety of the German communications; the prompt supply of transport, money, or other things requisitioned; and the avoidance of any of the many (and often vague) things which the German commander, in his absolute discretion, might regard as helping the French enemy or interfering with the invaders’ military plans. Failure, or alleged failure, on the part of the inhabitants exposed the hostages to heavy fines, deportation, long imprisonment, or prompt death at the hands of a firing party. Now, hostages have, in such circumstances, no effective power of control over a scattered and distracted population, and they are in no way responsible for the military action of their country’s forces. For these reasons, the taking and (on occasion) execution or other penalising of hostages

is abhorrent to Christian sentiment and the modern practice of civilised war. Part 2, Chapter I. (section 7), of the German War Book deals with this question of hostages, and it admits what follows: "Every writer outside Germany has stigmatised this measure as contrary to the law of nations, and as unjustified towards the inhabitants of the country." The same official publication goes on to say that this practice of taking hostages "was also recognised on the German side as harsh and cruel," but that its supreme justification was "the fact that it proved completely successful." In the war of 1870, the Germans (says the War Book) forced their French hostages "to accompany trains and locomotives." In the town of — (where I was billeted for a week in the mayor's house) the Germans, when in retreat before the advancing French troops, found yet another use for hostages. A large number of the townsfolk (variously estimated for me by many eye-witnesses) were "rounded up" as hostages by the retreating invaders. Those unhappy civilians were placed in two guarded lines along two adjoining bridges and their approaches, at the very edge of the town. One of these bridges was over a canal, the other over a river beside the canal; and over these two bridges the German troops proceeded to retreat between the two long rows of French hostages: the idea was that the oncoming French would, in order to save their own people, forego the military advantage of blowing up the bridges with high explosive shells or of treating the flying enemy

to doses of bursting shrapnel or machine-gun fire. The French shrapnel did, however, spatter over the bridges, smiting friend as well as foe. All my local informants assured me that, as each hapless hostage dropped, slain or wounded, he was thrown by his captors into the water, from which the bodies of twenty-two of them were subsequently recovered.

Although permitted and authorised by the German War Book, the exposure of civilians to the fire of their own troops is, of course, contrary to the usages of civilised war. It is expressly forbidden by Chapter XIV., sec. 163, of the British "Manual of Military Law."

2. *PILLAGE.*

In every war there occurs, in some or other degree, the looting of private property. (By looting is meant private thefts committed by individuals.) In a previous letter to you, I was able to bear personal testimony to the generally splendid conduct of our New Zealand troops in this respect; and I have reason to believe that the restraint practised by them, in this matter, represents the general attitude of the whole army. In the old wars, for instance, fowls, even in friendly countries, were commonly looked upon by soldiers as "derelict goods," the lawful prize of the first comer. And so they were regarded by both German officers and men. But since the enforced retirement of the invaders, domestic fowls have again gradually multiplied in Northern France; and it is a high

tribute to our men to state that these important "live stock" of the French people, in the regions traversed by me, are practically as safe from confiscation as they would be in New Zealand or the British Isles. The fowl-runs in the war area represent a testimonial to the good conduct of our men, just as surely as another excellent testimonial is furnished by the great and highly reciprocated kindness and affection which they manifest to the children. This sometimes shows itself in quaint and "spoiling" ways (as some of them would to their own little ones), but always with the best intentions.

In modern military law, the seizure of the private property of non-belligerents is not permissible, except under the pressure of immediate military necessity; and where it is so taken, it is to be paid for on the spot, or its receipt acknowledged by a proper document. Over all the regions of France and Belgium traversed by me, and formerly occupied by German troops, the plunder of the private property of civilians was carried out in a generally wholesale way, without any pretence of military necessity, without payment, and usually without receipt, under the orders and direct supervision of army officers, and as an act of settled State policy. The evidence of this public policy of plunder was simply overwhelming; it extended over the whole occupied area visited by me; and it spared no class or section of the people—involving rich and poor alike to the extent of their respective chattel resources. Collating

the oral and ocular evidence furnished to me by, literally, hundreds of townspeople, villagers, and peasantry, I found that the general official procedure was as follows :—

At an early suitable moment after the occupation of a country district or centre of population, official arrangements were made for the seizure and exportation of the greater part of the chattel property of the inhabitants. For this purpose, a sufficient supply of motor lorries was assembled. Squads of soldiers, under the supervision of officers, proceeded with the work of plunder. Others raided the fields and farms, collected and drove off all horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, etc., and took possession of all fowls and Belgian hares (which were numerous raised in Northern France for food purposes). Returns were demanded of all stock, stores of grain and other food-stuffs—the failure of a boy to mention a quantity of wheat concealed in a cellar, resulted in his being shot by a firing-party close to my last billet in France. Grain and forage were seized and sent away ; so, too, was a great part (sometimes nearly all) the food in dwellings ; and much of the sustenance of even poor people was roughly thrown about, damaged, wasted, or destroyed. This was in 1914–15. Bed-coverings were almost invariably taken ; so, usually, were linen and woollen articles (underclothing of every sort included), napkins, towels, curtains, table-covers, etc., ornaments, and furniture, excepting (as a rule) bedsteads and other heavy and cumbrous pieces. Locked drawers,

presses, etc., were broken open. Money, plate, costly ornaments of comfortably portable size, and jewellery seem (according to the information given to me by numerous victims of this modern Great Pillage) to have been specially favoured by the officers. And when the work was done to the satisfaction of the Command, the long procession of high-loaded motor lorries set out on its way towards the Rhine.

I will give here just three partial instances of the truly Prussian thoroughness with which this policy of plunder was carried out, in violation of natural right and the law of nations. One woman villager, a worker's wife, showed me her gutted (but somewhat reorganised) home, and wound up her detailed description of the official pillage with these words: "Those Prussians did not even leave me my baby's little booties or socks or shirts—they took everything, everything, everything (ils ont tout pris, tout, tout, tout)." Only a few doors away from her humble abode stood (and stands) the big house of a manufacturer with whom I was billeted for some days. He had sent away his wife and children shortly before the invaders occupied the village. These made a pretty clean sweep of his house. Several Prussian officers were billeted there. They personally stole every article of jewellery in the place, and all the valuable gold and silver family plate (some of it consisting of old and treasured heirlooms); they seized a number of costly gold and other ornaments; they invaded every drawer,

and even carried away his wife's silk dresses. All his oil-paintings were taken away, except a few, of lesser value, and some of these were slashed with sword-cuts. "Ils ont tout pillé (they have pillaged everything)," said my host to me in his account of the behaviour of his guests from beyond the Rhine. Just one other instance out of a great number that might be cited: It occurred at a little farmhouse, the home of a poor, childless, and very old widow, just behind our fighting lines. I was billeted in that shell-cracked farmhouse, within German gun-fire range, for thirty-two days, while serving as chaplain in the fighting lines. The local evidence went to show that the poor old woman's home and little farm, like many others in the neighbourhood, was pretty thoroughly "cleaned up" by the plunder-parties. Her own story, and that of another old eye-witness living in the house, was to this effect: That the military officials took practically everything, down to the last fowl; that they compelled the old woman to cook her own stolen food for them; that they fed inordinately thereon, drank great quantities of her coffee, and (said she) "what they did not devour, they wasted," leaving hardly a scrap of eatable food in the place. "Payment?" she replied, in answer to a question; "not a sou!" And receipt for goods taken? "There was no receipt," said she. The same replies were, in substance, made to me in all of the hundreds of cases of officer-led plunder of which I have a recollection. And, according to international law

and to established conventions (to which Germany was a party), such a course of conduct in war is illegal: it is thieving, naked and unadorned.

LEVIES.

Article 52 of the Hague Regulations declares, in regard to requisitions:—"They must be in proportion to the resources of the country." This provision is, as to its purport and effect, embodied in section 416 of the British "Manual of Military Law," and the British Requisitioning Instructions. The same just and humane Hague Regulation was affirmed by Article 40 of the Declaration of Brussels, accepted by Germany. But it is also set aside in Chapter IV of the German War Book, where it declares that "it will scarcely ever be observed in practice," and that "in cases of necessity the needs of the army will alone decide." Over a great part of the country visited by me, the civilian population not alone had their chattel property systematically plundered, but they were, in addition to this, subjected to racking (sometimes confiscatory) money fines and levies. Some small hamlets, robbed of practically everything, and living in part on borrowed money, had to provide, on short notice, forced contributions running into £160 and upwards. From the information supplied to me by my manufacturing host and others, some of these compulsory payments, in the circumstances of the contributors, amounted in practical effect to the "buccaneering levies" (*brandschatzungen*) which are declared to be illegal in Chapter IV of the German

War Book. Yet this cruel and unjust measure is in full accord with the spirit of the militarist writers whose pagan principles are crystallised in the War Book. One of these is Clausewitz, an authority of high standing with Prussian militarists. In the fifth chapter of his "Vom Kriege," he declares that the military right of requisitioning private property "has no limits except those of the exhaustion, impoverishment, and devastation of the whole country." And, despite its condemnation of "buccaneering levies" and some commendable references to the rights of private property, the German War Book itself reaches the same merciless conclusion. This is stated in the third paragraph of the Introduction and in a fierce foot-note quotation thereto from Moltke, which is given with approval. Both in text and foot-note we find, nut-shelled, the Prussian policy of "terrorismus" against both the persons and the property of non-combatant populations.

3. *MURDER OF CIVILIANS.*

Another and more terrible form of this established Prussian militarist policy of "terrorisation" of peaceful populations is the frequent and unnecessary taking of civilian lives. From numerous eye-witnesses—of the classes already described—I heard details of the murders of many unarmed civilians. One of these, already referred to above, was a mere boy, guilty of no military offence punishable by death. As illustrating the methods followed by officers in

some such cases of murder, I cite two instances vouched for by competent and respectable eye-witnesses frequently seen by me. The first of these cases, already mentioned in a previous letter to you, will bear repetition :—

During the early days of my stay at the front, in Northern France, I visited one of my priests, a Catholic chaplain, who was then billeted, with two other New Zealand officers, at a better class of farm house, quite close to the trenches. I had been informed that the house-mother there was witness to a tragedy that had been reported to me. I found her to be an extremely pious Catholic woman, of middle age, fairly educated, and speaking better French than is common among the peasantry of that region. She confirmed, even in most details, the story which I had heard, and told me, in substance, what follows :—Her brother, a farmer, lived near by—a quiet, inoffensive man, very industrious, extremely careful not to mix himself up in military or political matters, not guilty of spying or any civil or military offence, and immensely devoted to his wife and three children. While my informant was on a visit to him, there entered some German officers. One of them (without any judicial formality) drew his sword and severed the farmer's hand at the wrist, the hand dropping to the floor. They then fired three revolver shots at him, two of the shots penetrating the victim's abdomen, the third his throat. All this took place in the presence of the victim's sister (my informant), and of his wife and three children, all of whom were frantic with horror

at the sudden tragedy. The poor man's sister cried to him: "Oh, brother, you are dying; make an act of sorrow for your sins and of love of God." He replied faintly: "I cannot, sister; say them for me." Then his sister knelt beside him and began to recite the prayers. When she was so engaged, the dying man cried out: "I am done for!" and, making a big sign of the Cross over himself, began to recite the acts of sorrow for sin and of love of God. And so he died. The sorrow-riven widow, seemingly almost unbalanced by grief, left the scene of the tragedy, and lives in the town of ————, where I was billeted in the mayor's house for a week. In that town, the hostages were killed (as already described), and close to it occurred the further outrages to which reference is made hereunder.

A little over a mile westward from the town last referred to, there stands, close together, a group of small farmhouses—some of them at one time billets for our soldiers. I visited some of them from time to time—one of these (not a billet) being the home of a widow whose husband had also been cruelly murdered without any judicial formality, by German officers. He had hidden under some hay in his barn as soon as as he heard the rattle of German rifles "shooting up" the country around about. (I found a rather widespread impression among the peasantry, for many miles around, that persons running away, or found hiding, were regularly shot on sight by the then newly arrived invaders.) In the course of their search of the little farm in question, they discovered

the hidden man, and the officers perforated him with seven revolver bullets. This is the statement made to me by his widow and by the family next door (only some twenty yards away), who quite plainly heard the shots that widowed their plundered neighbour and orphaned her children. The next door house referred to was also pretty thoroughly stripped, but the occupying troops did not otherwise molest the house-mother and the five delightful little children there, who used to swarm joyously about me when I visited the billets nearby. When, in company with two of my chattering little friends, I paid a first visit of sympathy to the widow of the murdered man, she was busy winnowing peas in the barn, the same barn, grinding heavily on the handle of a big noisy machine. Her face looked towards the wall furthest from me. When she had finished the loaded hopper, she turned suddenly at the sound of my greeting. I shall carry to my death the agony staring out of her eyes and set in the closely crowded wrinkles prematurely carved by grief, and the utter hopelessness and helplessness that marked her mechanically-told tale of swift tragedy. There must be many such eyes in France and Belgium, that shall ever be riveted upon such sudden horror, until death, in mercy, closes them.

SOME OTHER CASES.

Of the various other cases brought to my notice, I will mention only those that follow:—In the neighbouring town (a little over a mile away) seventeen civilians were (I was informed on the spot) put to

death by the invaders ; in a village close by, several others. I had heard a great deal about a ghastly massacre perpetrated close to the village of D——, a little over two miles from the town mentioned above, where the hostages were lined up along the bridges. I spent part of a January day investigating the matter, right upon the spot, and among those (including the parish priest) who were likely to furnish me with reliable information. I learned, in substance, that eleven flying peasants (several of them being refugees from other invaded districts) were “ rounded up ” a few hundred yards outside the village, compelled (without trial) to dig a big pit, and then shot into it by a party of Prussian troops, under the direction of a Prussian colonel. The parish priest (who, by the way, was for a time a hostage) showed me the position of the pit into which the victims were shot. It is in an open field, outside the village. Three of the murdered men, local people, were exhumed and interred in consecrated ground in the parish cemetery, beside the ruins of the once beautiful church which the Prussians fired and destroyed on the eve of their retreat before the advancing French. A Prussian major assured the parish priest (so the latter informed me) that the civilian population of the place had not fired upon or molested the invaders. Such a course of action would, indeed, have been an act of supreme folly on the part of the women, children, and the few men (mostly old or unfit) left at the time in those French country-sides—especially in view of the well-known and oft-proclaimed methods

of proscription and terrorism with which any civilian interference would be avenged, even upon the innocent, as was done in the well-remembered days of 1870. In view of this well-known German policy, the local authorities at D—— (and in these parts of France generally, so far as I know) seized the few shot-guns and other weapons of offence in each commune, and stored them, under lock and key, in the Mairie, whenever there arose any probability of the early arrival of the invaders. In a town and a village in which I was billeted, it was suggested or asserted by German officers that shots were fired by civilians. This, however, was hotly denied by prominent citizens, and one mayor assured me (as he had previously assured these officers) that the shots complained of were fired, in his full view, by organised French troops in retreat. That, however, did not save the place from enormous levies. And both the clergy and the civil authorities rather frequently voice the conviction that such accusations were merely a pretext for pursuing the German State policy of “ruthlessness” and “terrorismus” in the form of exactions in blood and coin. In any case, I was assured, many times over, that no proper trial, or no judicial proceeding of any sort, preceded the penalty of death or of confiscatory levies. The German War Book declares that the slaying of prisoners is sometimes “expedient”—although it acknowledges the proceedings to be always “ugly.” But even a civilian prisoner does not lightly lose, either by natural law or international convention, his right to a fair trial before forfeiting his life.

And even if attacks were really made by individuals upon the invaders, the Prussian method of inflicting general penalties, in such cases, is forbidden by Article 50 of the Hague Convention (Annex): "No collective penalty, pecuniary or otherwise, shall be inflicted upon the population on account of the acts of individuals, for which it cannot be regarded as collectively responsible." But a wide range of tragic outrage and wrong is left to the discretion of officers in the following words of sweeping menace contained in the official Introduction to the War Book: "Certain severities are indispensable in war; nay, more, true humanity very often lies in a ruthless application of them." But neither militarist sanction, nor even the plea of "orders," can be held to justify "inherently immoral" acts of violence and inhumanity, such as are permitted in the pages of the German War Book.

SOME "NOT BAD."

Everywhere that I went, both in France and Belgium, I found that the people asserted differences in conduct among the various national elements of the German army of occupation. Even among French soldiers and some veterans of the war of 1870, I met sometimes with good words, sometimes with merely negative and comparative commendation, for Rhinelanders, Saxons, and a few others. I came across a certain number of cases in which both German officers and men were, for instance, ashamed of the evil work of State-organised plunder. And

this was especially the case where they were billeted upon, and kindly treated by, the people whose homes they were ordered to pillage. In such cases, the work of plunder, although carried out, was generally by no means so searching and merciless as it too frequently was elsewhere. Regarding such troops, the people would remark that they were "not bad," "not at all bad," that there were some "quite respectable men among them," and that this or that officer was "courteous" or "amiable," etc. Yet even the least objectionable of the invaders seem to have, under "orders," inflicted rather severe ordeals upon the people.

I had read a number of statements to the discredit of the Bavarian troops during the early part of the war. I was, therefore, quite unprepared for the practically universal verdict in their favour all over those invaded parts of the war-zone where I was in touch with the civilian population. These troops may or may not have been average samples of the Bavarian armies. On that point I venture no expression of opinion. But this I know: that, over the districts where I found they had been in occupation, the unfailing answer to inquiries was to this effect: That, among the invaders of these parts, the Bavarians were the most inclined to consideration and mercy in the gathering of spoil, less given than others to the "shooting up" of civilians, and, in billets comparatively unobjectionable. The statement (published in British papers early in the war) was several times re-told to me in France, that two

Bavarian regiments had mutinied against the execution of some of the "frightfulness" orders given in Belgium, and had been transferred elsewhere ; and some instances were mentioned to me of real kindness, on their part, towards the people.

I mentioned this unexpectedly favourable verdict regarding Bavarians to a British officer occupying an important position in Belgium : he was one of the comparatively few who spoke French, and, practically from the beginning of the war, mixed freely with the people in (among others) the selfsame areas as were covered by my experiences at the front. He assured me that his information, derived from the people, expressed, on every side, the same opinion. And he told me the following illustrative case, which was afterwards repeated to me, in substance, by some residents near the spot :—

This British officer's story relates to a now battered and uninhabited farmhouse, at present within our lines. For over a month I visited it or passed by it almost daily, on my way to or from the fire-trench. During the German occupation, the farm-buildings were used for a time as billets for a detachment of Bavarians. Just before their arrival there, the house-mother had died, leaving several helpless little children. The Bavarians told the bereaved father that he might pursue serenely his usual outdoor occupations, and that they, in the meantime, would look after the household and the motherless little ones. The cooking, washing, tidying-up, etc., were

(I was assured) carried out with great, fastidious care; the house was a picture, the children shining examples of neatness and greatly attached to the big, hefty fellows from beyond the Rhine.

THE PRUSSIANS.

I met several French civilians who spoke not unkindly of individual Prussian soldiers who had been billeted upon them. I met one, and only one Frenchman in my experience who spoke well of a Prussian officer. That was the parish priest (already referred to), and he spoke very kindly indeed of the Prussian major already mentioned in the course of this letter. But in regard to the other Prussian officers with whom he had come into contact, his mildest expression was that they were all "arrogant" and "evil-mannered." For the rest, I made numerous other inquiries regarding Prussian officers; as distinguished from officers of other sections of the German army. Such inquiries or remarks were ordinarily met with set lips and flashing eye; with declarations that, though the Prussian private was sometimes "not bad," the Prussian officers were the most ruthless in pillage and the murder of civilians; and with such epithets (hundreds of times repeated) as "brutal," "merciless," and (over and over again) "ce sont tous des barbares—mais tous, tous (they are all barbarians, all, all)." The general verdict, as expressed to me, was that the worst and most callous violators of the usages of civilised warfare were the Prussian officers, and that the worst of the Prussians

were the Pomeranians, both officers and men. (In this connection, it is, perhaps, a curious coincidence that, East Prussia is the home of the system known as "Prussianism," which has overlain Germany and organised the Empire, less as a State than as an Army bent on conquest.) The usually magnificent calm of French patience often breaks into a glow of hate when the Prussians and their ways are mentioned. With sundry other nationalities of the German Empire, it seemed to me that the peasantry of those regions felt that, under happier auspices, they might live, in peace, as neighbours, in a neighbourly way. I thus gathered that, even amidst the fierce resentments aroused by such methods of warfare, the Northern French peasant is often able to judge as does President Wilson, between the German people and the Prussian military oligarchy. These, and their methods of pagan "frightfulness," have seared the brain and soul of the Flandrian populations.

4. *DESTRUCTION OF CHURCHES.*

In a previous letter, I referred, in some detail, to the systematic destruction of churches by German troops, under the direction of their officers. I may perhaps, usefully repeat what I there set down, and add thereto some few general remarks which are called for by later and more extended observations on the spot. From townsfolk, villagers, peasantry, British officers and others I learned that the German method of dealing with our churches proceeded generally along the following lines in the parts of

France under consideration here: When a retreat from a hamlet, village, or town seemed to them an early likelihood, the German officers in command requisitioned all the kerosene (known in the British Isles as "paraffin") and benzine around about, introduced straw, firewood, and other inflammable material into the church, piled up chairs, benches, etc., flooded the place as well as they could with the liquid, and then set the whole thing alight. They also, at times, distributed explosives in places where they were calculated to increase the damage. In sundry cases it was evident to even the most casual observer that the building was of little or no use for purposes of military observation or offence, being without tower, spire, or other such feature, and being overlooked (in some cases which I noted) by taller buildings. Occasionally, one sees only one building in a village burned down—it is the church. More numerous still are the churches destroyed by German guns firing high explosive shells. I ascertained that, in several cases, the church towers had been used by both French and Germans in turn for observation purposes. In such cases, the destruction of the observation post was a legitimate, though regrettable, military measure. But one curiously frequent and significant fact struck me in connection with the churches burned down or otherwise destroyed by retreating German troops in the area of France to which I refer. It is this: Over a wide area, *nearly every tower was left standing, a conspicuous landmark in the flat landscape.* With a minimum of trouble, they could have all been

immediately used for observation purposes by the advancing French troops. The spires, where present, were burned down or blown down; and the towers in question could easily have been in great part demolished by high explosives, such as were sometimes used upon the walls. But they were left, and still they stand. And it is assumed that they were spared for a German military purpose, namely, to serve as useful landmarks for "ranging" the German artillery. In one small area visited by me, close to our lines, six churches were destroyed. Two of the priests were killed, and a third had an extremely narrow escape.

Mention might here be made of a peculiar form of "frightfulness" followed by the Germans in destroying some of the churches in this district by high explosive shells. After a vigorous, accurate, and destructive bombardment of one church only (other buildings around being left comparatively little damaged) the firing suddenly ceased for a time. The parishioners (a very pious population hereabouts) felt confident that the bombardment was at an end, and they gradually assembled in and around their church to see and estimate the damage done. The vast majority of the gatherings naturally consisted of women, children, and old men—the fit men of military age being away in camp or billet or trench. Suddenly, without warning, the German guns broke out again, this time in a furious tempest of shrapnel, with results to the civilian population which you can well imagine. I heard of this form of "ruthlessness" from a number of persons, and (as regards one very considerable

centre of population) from some New Zealand officers who were present, as well as from one of the priests of my diocese, a military chaplain, who witnessed the destruction, by these means, of one church of great beauty from his billet in the same square.

5. *VARIOUS.*

Article 44 of the Hague Regulations says :—" Any compulsion, by a belligerent, on the population of occupied territory, to give information as to the army of the other belligerent, or as to his means of defence, is prohibited." This just and humane provision is one of the many such repudiated in the German War Book. It says in Part II, Chapter I: " A still more severe measure is the compulsion of the inhabitants to furnish information about their own army, its strategy, its resources, and its military secrets. The majority of writers of all nations are unanimous in their condemnation of this measure. Nevertheless, it cannot be entirely dispensed with; doubtless it will be applied with regret, but the argument of war will frequently make it necessary."

The compulsory betrayal of a country by its invaded inhabitants is thus, quite properly, forbidden by the Hague Regulations. They also (Articles 23 and 52) forbid the forcing of the inhabitants of an occupied region to engage in work designed to injure their country. The official German War Book also treats as " a scrap of paper " this valued provision of Christian and civilised warfare, and it authorises such unjust compulsion of civilians even to the extent of " shooting some of them " in case of refusal (Part II, Chapter I). During my stay in France I heard a few vague allegations of attempted compulsion under

both these heads, but no time was left to investigate them. I merely set down here the provision officially made for such very terrible forms of compulsion. You can judge for yourself whether or not the evidence recently supplied tends to show that, in point of fact, Belgian and French deportees are being compelled to engage (even in the fire-area) in work designed to injure their respective countries.

The same official War Book approves of certain other resorts "on which," says Professor Morgan, "International Law is silent because it will not admit the possibility of their existence" among civilised peoples. I refer to the German War Lords' sanction of "the exploitation of the crimes of third parties (assassination, incendiarism, robbery, and the like) to the prejudice of an enemy" (War Book, Part I, Chapter II, near end). This sufficiently explains certain forms of German official activity in the United States which were lately the subject of strong diplomatic and judicial action in that country. The War Book seeks to justify the "inherently immoral" exploitation of crime by the following un-Christian doctrine of Professor Lueder: "The ugly and inherently immoral aspect of such methods cannot affect the recognition of their lawfulness. The necessary aim of war gives the belligerent the right and imposes upon him, according to circumstances, the duty not to let slip the important—it may be the decisive—advantages to be gained by such means." A still wider field to excess and barbarism in war is officially laid open in the Introduction to the German War Book, where it lays down the three following guiding principles:—

1. "Humanitarian claims, such as the protection of men and their goods, can only be taken into consideration in so far as the nature and object of war permit. Consequently, the 'argument of war' permits every belligerent State to have recourse to all means which enable it to attain the object of the war." (Please note this sweeping justification of "all means.")

2. It is not declared to be, in any case, a matter of moral obligation, but merely of "advisability," to accept "a limitation in the use of certain methods of war and a total renunciation of others"—where such limitation and restriction are dictated by "chivalrous feelings, Christian thought, higher civilisation, and (by no means least of all) the recognition of one's own advantage."

3. The War Book recognises no binding force in the "laws of war," the "usage of war," or "international agreements" limiting "the unrestricted and reckless application of all the available means for the conduct of war." Such agreements (says the Introduction) are merely "a limitation of arbitrary behaviour, which custom and conventionality, human friendliness and a calculated egoism have erected, but for the observance of which there exists no express sanction, but only 'the fear of reprisals' decides."

The organised official effort to create misery and strike terror may have succeeded as regards its immediate object. But, from viewpoints of greater permanence and importance, it has not alone failed, but has even recoiled upon its authors. For, more than others, the inhabitants of the formerly terrorised

regions are filled with a patriotic ardour, and with a fierce determination to carry on the war to the bitter end, and to secure, with victory, ample reparation for the sufferings which have been needlessly inflicted upon them.

CONCLUSION.

In view of the War Book's repudiation of so many principles and methods of civilised warfare, it seems, to some extent, superfluous to adduce evidence of "ruthlessness" and "terrorisation" by armies trained and acting under its instructions. The Prussian militarists' War Book is, in effect, the expression of armed materialism running amok. It provides for, or permits, or supposes, practically every form of "frightfulness" laid to the charge of "Prussianism" during this great struggle; so far as lies in its power, it flings aside the precious results of the Church's centuries of effort (crystallised and extended in international conventions) to mitigate the atrocities of pagan warfare.

With human nature as it is, war has more than sufficient horror, even when hedged around about by the restrictions called for by chivalry, Christian moral principles, and international agreements. In the mass of men engaged in war there will also ever be some who will fall at times short of the ideals that become the Christian warrior. But just as surely, in the stress of war, will many tend to fall below the lower, as before the higher, ideal of soldierly right and duty; and depth will naturally and inevitably call to depth in the practical application of the hard, crude materialism of the Prussian military code. And, just as naturally,

such forms of military "frightfulness" as it sanctions or directs, tend to increase in number and intensity, to the progressive degradation of war. We witness the further developments of this tendency in the deliberate sinking of Belgian relief ships, in the large deportations of unprotected girls in France and Belgium (against which the Holy See has raised its voice in protest), and (not to mention other things) in the open and repeated destruction of hospital ships and the attempted slaughter of wounded soldiers and nurses upon the high seas—in direct violation of Hague Convention, No. 10. And the end is not yet. The Prussian militarists' "recourse to *all means*" is by no means exhausted. Nor, humanly speaking, will it be until its practically possible limits are reached or until the system and the narrow militarist caste which created and administers it are overwhelmingly defeated. The alternative to such a defeat is either a triumph of such forms of materialistic barbarism, or that barbarism making ready for another spring. And either would be a tragedy for mankind. The fundamental issue now is this: Are we, or are we not, to hold what is still safe, and to restore what is being lost, of Christian and civilised intercourse between nation and nation? Great sacrifices are demanded where so great an issue is at stake.

I remain, dear Rev. Fathers, always

Affectionately yours,

+ HENRY W. CLEARY,

Bishop of Auckland.

